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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines the role of Mexican American parents in the educational lives of their children. Information is also included to help parents understand the reasons behind drug and alcohol abuse and to help them lessen the chances of their children becoming victims. Using pictorial representations as illustrations, this booklet explains what parents can actively do to help children develop into responsible adults: becoming involved in the schools, instilling values and attitudes, and providing love and encouragement. Chicano parents should help their children develop a positive self-image. (Author/BEF)

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COMMUNICATING WITH OUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS

U.S. Department of HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Public Health Service
Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration

National Institute on Drug Abuse
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, Maryland 20857

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted opinion that the most important part of a child's education takes place in the home. Schools provide, or attempt to provide, children with academic skills and, to some extent, social graces, but educators agree that schools are really very limited in the amount and the kinds of knowledge that they can provide children. Many of the more useful ideas and attitudes that children need to live happy and productive adult lives must be acquired in the home and not in the classroom. *It is, of course, the parents that must teach these ideas and attitudes to their children.*

This booklet examines the role of Mexican American parents in the educational lives of their children. **It is addressed to Chicano parents who are looking for ways to best prepare their children to meet the challenges of growing up and becoming adults in today's complex and sometimes confusing world.**

A major concern of many people is the growing use of drugs and alcohol by Chicano youngsters and young adults. It is hoped that the information contained in these pages will help parents understand some of the reasons behind this substance abuse problem and help them to lessen the chances of their children becoming victims of it.

The limitations of Schools

Many parents are confused by the idea that they have a part to play in the education of their children. *They often feel that education is the sole responsibility of the schools.* **The confusion is understandable since it stems from a narrow view of what education really is and an overestimation of how much schools can really accomplish.**

To begin with, education should not be thought of only as *"booklearning"* **or the study of the** *"Three R's — 'reading,' 'riting' and 'rithmetic'."* **This definition ignores the other aspect of a child's education; that is, the learning of ideas and development of attitudes about himself, other people, and the world around him. This type of education can be aptly called** *"social education"* **and has its start in the home, even before the child starts school.**

A second important point is that a school cannot teach a child if he or she is unwilling to learn. **An instructor, no matter how skilled, can only offer knowledge to the child.** *Only when the child is willing to accept that knowledge does learning take place.* **Parents, more than anyone else, can encourage learning by fostering in their children a healthy attitude towards school and by teaching their children respect for knowledge and the people who possess it.**

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Five ways

Parents can do much toward actively helping their children develop and mature into responsible adults. There are five major concepts that parents can apply to do this.

1 First, and most important, they can begin to openly and honestly communicate with their children.

2 Second, they can take an active interest in their children's school life and work closely with teachers and other parents.

3 Third, they can help to foster desirable values and attitudes in their children, particularly those values and attitudes relating to productive social behavior.

4 Fourth, they can provide constant encouragement and love to their children, especially during times of difficulty.

5 Finally, parents can, by a variety of means, help their children develop positive self-images and strong character traits.

Communication

Probably the most important, and sometimes most difficult, thing that parents can do to help their children is to communicate with them. This may appear like a simple task, but in reality, many parents and children do not communicate effectively with one another.

To understand this point, parents must first realize that communication between parent and child is not simply a matter of talking and listening. *True communication between members of a family must go deeper than just words; it must involve an exchange of feelings and emotions which can only be talked about among people who are close to one another.*

Another critical point for parents to keep in mind is that communication is a two-way street. The old notion that children should be seen and not heard is truly out of date. Children are people with feelings and ideas they need to express as much as adults do. *If a parent is not available to listen and understand, the child will turn to someone else or, worse yet, become shy, withdrawn, and emotionally troubled.*

Unfortunately, parents sometimes confuse communication with love. **The two are not the same. Love is an important and necessary part of a strong parent-child relationship, but it cannot substitute for honest and open communication.**

Parents who understand this and who are willing to listen to their children, as well as love them, will discover a stronger and more meaningful relationship.

One way that parents can teach and promote useful values and attitudes is by using themselves as models or examples for their children to emulate. Parents who live productive lives and approach life with a positive outlook can serve as living proof to young and impressionable children of the kind of happiness and success they can experience.

Parental Involvement in Schools

Many Chicano parents make the mistake of staying out of the school life of their children. Most of these parents do so because they believe that their children's academic training is best left to teachers and that parents would only interfere with that process. *Some parents, unfortunately, also feel a sense of inferiority because of language barriers or a lack of schooling, and as a result, are embarrassed to be among teachers.*

Parents who avoid getting involved in their children's schooling are not only hurting their children and making it harder on teachers, they are cheating themselves of an enriching experience. *By getting involved, parents demonstrate to their children the importance of school.* **At the same time, they enhance the teacher's effectiveness by making education a continuing activity for children, an activity which does not end with the ringing of the final bell at school. Parents who become active in school affairs will also feel a deep sense of accomplishment and pride in watching their children develop properly, and in knowing that they have played a major part in that process.**

It is especially important for parents of *"problem"* **children to take an interest in school.** *Too often, parents whose children misbehave in the classroom do not make the effort to find out why their children act the way they do.* **Without even discussing the matter with their children or the teacher, Chicano parents commonly will punish their children solely on the basis of what they hear from school.** *Children who experience such treatment often feel they have been dealt with unfairly and look for ways to "get back."* **This kind of attitude can only lead to future disciplinary problems unless the parents begin to take a closer look at the problem by learning more about the school environment.**

One way for parents to get involved is by joining the *Parent-Teachers Association* (PTA) chapter at their children's school. Also, parents should request *regular meetings* with their children's teachers to discuss the progress and the special needs of their children.

Values and Attitudes

Values can be considered the rules that guide a person's behavior, and attitudes as the feelings that a person has towards the world around him. *Many of a person's values and attitudes are developed early in life and often do not change even when the person matures into adulthood.* **That is why it is important that parents try to foster in their children the kinds of values and attitudes that will provide them with positive outlooks on life. A respect for knowledge and education, a desire to succeed in a profession or a vocation, compassion for the less fortunate, a respect for law and order, and a constructive approach to failures they experience are the types of values and attitudes that will enable children to develop into happy and productive adults.**

Parents should keep in mind, with respect to values and attitudes, that standards of behavior change with time and circumstances. *In other words, ideas about what is proper and improper behavior are not the same today as they were twenty years ago, nor are these ideas the same in the United States as they are, for example, in Mexico.*

First-generation and recent immigrant parents must be realistic in defining for their children what is right or wrong, good or bad, proper or improper, desirable or undesirable. A recent immigrant mother who insists on raising her daughter in the strict old ways of Mexico may subject her child to embarrassment among other children who are given more freedom to socialize with one another. Likewise, a first-generation father who scolds his teenage son for being assertive and outspoken, in the manner of the new generation of Chicanos, may at the same time be hurting his son's confidence and outlook on life.

This is not to say that parents should allow their children to grow up without some form of discipline; it only means that parents who were raised in a different time and place must accept the fact that the new generation of Chicanos are growing up in a different world, a world in which many old ideas must give way to the new.

Love and Encouragement

Children, in the process of acquiring discipline, cannot always motivate themselves to do their best in difficult tasks or activities. This is why it is important that parents provide the love and encouragement their children need to sustain them and to help them continue striving for success.

For most parents, expressions of love come normally and naturally; however, it should be mentioned that too much parental affection can be just as damaging as not enough. *Excessive affection can frighten and confuse a child and eventually lead to emotional problems resulting in escape from reality through the use of drugs or alcohol.*

One effective measuring device which a parent can utilize to assess relationships with their children is the child's desire to be out of the house, at a neighbor's or with friends. *The desire to explore other settings in the neighborhood is a healthy, normal state; however, when this desire becomes excessive, then maybe parents should begin to question it.* **For example, many young people appear to be more willing to do odd jobs for their neighbors than for their parents. This is understandable, since they are striving for outside as well as parental acceptance. However, when a child prefers to be with neighbors or friends day in and day out, then perhaps the child is looking elsewhere for a parental image or role model.**

Many parents get too involved in their own interests to which they invest all their emotional energy. The result is that they often have little to share with their family. Many of these parents realize the importance of sharing and giving of themselves to their families; however, when they do find the time to be with their children, they are emotionally drained and must pretend that they are enjoying themselves. *This method of sharing love with their children is very unsatisfying and has proven to be counter-productive. The affection an exhausted parent shows in many cases is untimely and superficial,giving the child an unnatural feeling.*

Regarding encouragement, parents can be especially helpful to their children by praising their accomplishments and comforting them in their failures. The latter is particularly important, since children are usually taught only to deal with success and not with failure.

Positive Self Image

A person who has no respect for himself is headed for difficulty. Such an individual usually has little respect for others as well, and the result is a withdrawn, unhappy person who has neither the confidence nor the desire to deal with other people in day-to-day social situations.

Oftentimes children develop negative self-images when they first notice that they are different from most other people around them. **Society, too, has traditionally defined** *"being different"* **as** *"being inferior."* **This tragic and cruel error has led many minority people, including Chicanos, to shy away from competing with the dominant society in many important areas such as** *employment, education, housing,* **and** *politics.* **The result has been the creation of a society in which** *segregation, discrimination,* **and** *racial tensions* **linger on.**

It is unrealistic to think that parents by themselves can somehow eliminate society's problems. **However, parents can play a major role in this effort by teaching their children that being different does not mean being inferior; it only means being different and nothing more.** *Chicano children, in particular, can profit from this way of thinking.* **For them, their cultural heritage can be represented as something to be proud of rather than as a source of shame or ridicule. When such children see themselves in this new light, they will be better prepared and more willing to associate and compete with all others for the better things in life.**

Children who develop positive attitudes toward themselves and the world around them will be less likely to experience the kinds of emotional and personality problems that frequently lead to forms of escape such as drug or alcohol abuse. *Chicano parents can help their children develop positive attitudes by building in their children the pride, confidence, and self-esteem youngsters need to cope with today's changing and competitive world.* **However, before they can do this parents must first strive to free themselves of any feelings of shame or inferiority that several generations of discrimination and mistreatment might have created.** *Only when Chicano parents themselves can see their people in a new and positive light can they pass on to their children the image of a new generation of strong, proud, and confident Chicanos.*

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Following is a bibliography selected to assist any parent who is interested in seeking further information in methods or strategies relative to communicating with their children. This bibliography was designed with the selected material also containing references to enhance research. Information regarding the availability of these books can be obtained by calling the Los Angeles County Public Library, Social Science Department at (213) 626-7555.

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